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A Convention Stampeded

On the eve of the Republican State Convention in 1875, a lone locomotive raced over the Rock Island railroad from Des Moines to Iowa City. Besides the engineer and fireman, it carried Senator William B. Allison, his private secretary, Joseph Morgan, and Jacob Rich, a veteran Iowa journalist — all of Dubuque, prominent figures in the Republican party, and intimate friends of Samuel J. Kirkwood. If any one had observed this distinguished trio hurrying away from the seat of political activity on a mysterious mission to Iowa City he must have wondered about the devious methods of politicians. Why should they be apparently deserting the central scene at the most strategic moment? Why the imperative haste which required such unusual means of transportation? What was the significance of their destination? Who lived at Iowa City that these political leaders needed to consult? Not a hint

of the expedition appeared in the newspapers. Why was the trip shrouded in such secrecy?

It was generally thought, before the Republican State Convention met at Des Moines in 1875, that James B. Weaver of Bloomfield would be nominated for the office of Governor. Mr. Weaver had a record of distinguished service during the Civil War for which he had been breveted brigadier general. He was a man of unimpeachable character and recognized ability. In politics he had long been a leader in the Republican party, respected alike for his honesty and independence. His support in the campaign of 1875 came principally from the temperance element of the party—a faction which was never strong in Dubuque and other river cities.

Other names were mentioned for the Governorship in the preconvention discussion of available candidates. John Russell, a former Auditor of State, was an avowed rival of General Weaver, while John H. Gear, Robert Smythe, and W. B. Fairfield were known to be in a receptive mood. Earlier in the season Samuel J. Kirkwood had been suggested as a gubernatorial possibility. Indeed, Kirkwood was for many years a name to conjure with in Iowa politics. Having served two terms as Governor with eminent ability during the Civil War, his popularity seemed to grow from year to year. In party councils his advice carried great weight. For a year following his Governorship, before retiring to his farm near Iowa City, he had sat in the United States

Senate, and now eight years later he hoped to be returned for a full term. To accept a third term as Governor might eliminate him from the forthcoming senatorial election. At all events he had publicly announced that he would positively refuse to accept the nomination for Governor, even if it were tendered to him. With Kirkwood out of the race, it was generally supposed that a majority of the delegates to the State convention would support Weaver. On the day before the convention, while the mysterious locomotive was speeding toward Iowa City, his nomination seemed to be assured.

The convention opened on the morning of June 30th. Moore's Opera House in Des Moines was crowded to its full capacity and hundreds of visitors were unable to gain admission. The meeting was called to order by George C. Hiberling, chairman of the State central committee. William Loughridge was chosen temporary chairman and, before taking the chair, gracefully expressed his appreciation of the honor conferred upon him. In a few well-chosen words he referred to the "glorious record of the Republican party", alluded briefly to State and national questions, and closed by impressing upon the convention the necessity of wise action in selecting a candidate for Governor.

At the afternoon session H. O. Pratt, of Floyd County, presided as permanent chairman of the convention. Having been escorted to the chair, Congressman Pratt made an eloquent and impressive

speech which was received with enthusiastic and prolonged applause. He congratulated the Republicans of Iowa upon "this magnificent uprising of intelligent men", gathered from every quarter of the State, "for no holiday parade, but for earnest, thoughtful work in the cause of Republicanism, liberty and good government." He spoke in eulogistic terms of the record the party had made and predicted that even greater progress would be recorded in the future.

Thus the preliminary formalities and customary partisan oratory filled the morning session without relieving the tense and strangely expectant air that pervaded the convention. It was known that the "saloon element" had been canvassing the situation all night, but as yet no plan of thwarting the nomination of General Weaver was apparent.

Not until the middle of the afternoon did the convention reach the principal business of nominating a candidate for Governor. Then the names of General Weaver, John Russell, John H. Gear, Robert Smythe, and W. B. Fairfield were each presented.

After the last speech there was a momentary lull before the balloting began. It was a psychological moment in the political history of Iowa — a moment fraught with opportunity for one faction and with disappointment and defeat for the other.

At this juncture Dr. S. M. Ballard, a member of the Audubon County delegation who had been an early settler of Johnson County, arose at his seat.

The appearance of Mr. Ballard, "an aged man nearer seven than six feet tall, with a full white beard reaching to his waist", attracted immediate attention. For a moment he stood there, a veritable representative of the prophets of old. And then, in tones that penetrated to every corner of the theater, he pronounced the name of Samuel J. Kirkwood as a candidate for the office of Governor.

Throwing the name of Kirkwood into that convention was "like casting a lighted torch into a basin of gasoline — it set it aflame with enthusiasm." Instantly the whole assembly was in a commotion. The Dubuque County delegation, which was seated on the stage, was apparently the most excited of all. A hurried consultation was held. Then one of the Dubuque delegates walked down to the front of the stage and, "leaning over the foot-lights and pointing his hand at the Audubon County delegation, which sat in the parquette not far from the stage," demanded to know by what authority the name of Mr. Kirkwood was presented. Again Dr. Ballard arose and "in a voice of peculiar power and magnetism" he answered unequivocally: "By the authority of the great Republican party of the State of Iowa." Had he added the memorable words of Ethan Allen at Ticonderoga, the scene would not have been more dramatic or the excitement more intense. The vociferous applause lasted several minutes.

Amid the tumult of cheers, "Honest John Russell" arose and, "with the Scotch accent peculiar to

the man'', declared that although his name had been presented to the convention, he would not be a candidate in opposition to the great War Governor, whom he was proud to esteem so highly that he preferred him for Governor above any and all other men. "My personal interests and ambitions", he said, "are nothing compared with the interests of my party. So I withdraw my name and second the motion of the gentleman from Audubon as evincing the will and wish of the great body of the Republicans of the State."

Mr. Gear likewise withdrew from the race, saying: "I most cordially second the motion to nominate the old War Governor, who sent seventy-five thousand of our Iowa boys in blue cheering to the front to help so potentially in subduing the rebellion, and give to Iowa a war record second to no other State in the Union." The brief speeches by the retiring candidates were delivered with fire and were followed by such tumultuous cheers as were never heard before in any political gathering in the State.

After the applause had subsided, Senator Frank T. Campbell had the temerity to inquire whether the friends of Mr. Kirkwood on the floor of the convention had not received word from him saying that he would not be a candidate. This was met by cries of "Don't care if they have" and "It don't make any difference".

Prompted by the prevailing enthusiasm, Dr. Ballard moved to nominate Governor Kirkwood by

acclamation. This motion met with decided opposition, however, and was withdrawn. A roll call of counties was then taken. Audubon County being near the head of the alphabetic list held a strategic position. Its demonstration in support of Kirkwood was followed by other counties and 268 of the 612 votes were cast for Kirkwood on the first ballot. Two hundred votes went to Weaver, 111 to Smythe, and 33 to Fairfield. Three hundred and seven were necessary for a choice. The convention therefore proceeded to take a formal ballot, but before the tellers could announce the results counties began to change their votes in support of Kirkwood, whereupon Captain John A. T. Hull, one of General Weaver's chief supporters, moved to make the nomination of Governor Kirkwood unanimous. The motion was greeted "with thundering applause" and adopted forthwith.

Rev. I. P. Teter, a member of the convention, moved that the secretary telegraph to Kirkwood asking if he would accept. The motion was met with a storm of protests. "Hon. John Y. Stone arose amid the tumult to say, 'Gov. Kirkwood *must* accept.' This was the signal for such wild applause that Mr. Teter withdrew his motion, saying he would substitute therefor a second to the positive declaration of Senator Stone."

While the convention was still in an uproar because of the unexpected "stampede" many messages were flashing over the telegraph wires from Des

Moines to Iowa City. "Kirkwood nominated for governor first ballot amid most tumultuous applause I ever witnessed", telegraphed James S. Clarkson to George G. Wright, who was then living in Iowa City. "Under no circumstances must he decline." To Kirkwood himself came a telegram signed by John H. Gear, William Larrabee, Ed. Wright, R. S. Finkbine, J. G. Foote, and J. Q. Tufts: "All candidates withdrawn in your favor. You are nominated by acclamation. You must accept. It will come out all right." From Nathaniel B. Baker, Adjutant General during the Civil War, came the friendly assurance, "It could not be helped. It was the only road out. And now, I think it does not hurt you on U. S. Senator." R. S. Finkbine was even more certain on this point, for he was confident that Kirkwood's election as Governor would give him "a hold on the party for the Senatorship, which neither *Hell* — nor *Harlan* could defeat."

Although he had apparently indicated to the secret emissaries of the locomotive expedition that he would accept the nomination, Kirkwood was slow in replying to the urgent messages of his friends. "Why in thunder don't you accept? Answer!" was the impatient telegram from Ed. Wright which reached Iowa City at 4:40 in the afternoon. Finally the candidate, with an air of reluctance, wired his consent: "If I must, say yes for me."

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